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Navigating Challenges and Enhancing Effectiveness: The First-Year Experience of Novice Teachers

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Abstract

The transition from student to teacher represents a transformative period filled with both opportunities and challenges. This study examines the early teaching experiences of novice educators as they navigate their first year in the profession. A qualitative case study design was employed to gather data through semi-structured interviews with new English teachers in Guanajuato City. Participants shared their reflections on the realities, this revealed that novice teachers often struggle to establish their teaching identity. Additionally, the study found that while some mentoring and guidance were available, they often lacked consistency and did not address the teachers' individual needs. The study highlights the need for more structured and responsive support systems that align with novice teachers' experiences and challenges. By understanding the complexities of this transitional period, stakeholders in education can design interventions that not only support teachers but also positively impact the learning experiences of their students.

Keywords: novice teachers, first-year experience, mentoring, teacher development, challenges.

1. Introduction

The first year of teaching is a critical stage in a novice teacher's professional journey. It is a time marked by new responsibilities, complex classroom dynamics, and the challenge of translating theoretical knowledge into practical strategies. For many novice teachers, this period can be both exciting and overwhelming as they begin to develop their teaching identity. Understanding these early experiences is essential, as they shape how teachers adapt to the demands of the profession. The first year is often characterized by numerous challenges. Many new teachers struggle with issues, which can affect their confidence and ability to deliver effective instruction. At the same time, the types of support novice teachers receive can significantly influence how they respond to these challenges.

This study explores the experiences of novice teachers by focusing on the challenges they encounter and the support that helps them in their growth by examining teachers' reflections on their initial years. Using semi-structured interviews, this study provides an in-depth look at the realities of novice teachers' experiences and aims to inform strategies that enhance their confidence, and long-term success in the classroom.

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2. Literature review

2.1 *Development of teacher identity*

Teacher identity refers to how teachers see themselves in their roles as educators. For novice teachers, building a strong identity is essential because it guides their actions in the classroom and supports their professional growth. Pennington and Richards (2016) explain that teacher identity is shaped by three main areas: personal, contextual, and professional. Personal factors include the teacher's background, personality, and how they connect with students. Contextual factors involve the environment in which they teach, such as school culture, student needs, and expectations from colleagues or administrators. Professional factors refer to their beliefs about teaching, their subject knowledge, and the teaching methods they use.

For novice teachers, these factors can sometimes create confusion and lead to self-doubt. Some new teachers may feel pressure to imitate others or change their style to fit in, which can affect their confidence and classroom performance. Understanding teacher identity is crucial because it influences how confident and effective a teacher becomes. During their first year, many teachers are still discovering what kind of educator they want to be. Supporting novice teachers as they develop their identity is essential for building strong and reflective professionals who can continue to grow in their careers.

Understanding how teacher identity evolves during the first year of teaching is crucial for this research, as it provides insight into the internal processes that influence a novice teacher's ability to navigate challenges and become an effective educator. By exploring how identity development affects classroom actions, this study can offer recommendations for supporting a teacher in building a positive and resilient sense of self in their professional role.

2.2 *Classroom challenges faced by novice teachers*

Starting a teaching BA is a mix of excitement and difficulty. Many novice teachers encounter several challenges that can make their first year stressful and overwhelming. These challenges can impact their confidence, classroom performance, and overall professional growth. Sözen (2018) highlights that novice teachers often feel unprepared to control the class. This lack of experience makes it difficult for them to teach effectively and stay motivated. Additionally, new teachers sometimes feel isolated due to a lack of sufficient support from their colleagues.

Another significant challenge relates to professional development. Many beginner teachers struggle to improve their teaching skills because they lack proper guidance and resources (Makoa & Segalo, 2021). This demonstrates that novice teachers often feel lost when planning lessons or trying to adapt to classroom realities. Septiani et al. (2019) point out that the gap between what teachers learn in training and what they face in a real classroom can be quite wide, making it harder for novice teachers to apply their knowledge in practice. the first year of teaching is therefore filled with obstacles that can make teachers feel anxious and unsure about handling classroom situations. Addressing these challenges is an important first step in supporting novice teachers to succeed in their careers.

Examining the challenges novice teachers face is critical to understand why some teachers struggle to apply their training effectively in the classroom. By identifying these obstacles, this research can provide valuable insights into the kinds of support and interventions that can make a positive difference in the first-year experience, ultimately enhancing teachers' confidence and classroom performance.

2.3 *Professional development*

Poom-Valickis (2014) points out that novice teachers experience a variety of difficulties during their induction year and that continuous support is crucial for helping them become confident professionals. Professional development is an essential part of becoming an effective teacher. Poom-Valickis emphasizes that beginning teachers benefit most when schools provide opportunities to reflect and constructive feedback. This reflection process helps teachers understand classroom dynamics better and develop stronger teaching strategies.

Septiani et al. (2019) also emphasize that the gap between teacher training and real-world teaching challenges makes it harder for novice teachers to apply what they have learned. Professional development is an important part of this research because it is one of the main tools that can improve a novice teacher's effectiveness.

Focusing on professional development allows this research to explore how ongoing training, reflection, and feedback can empower novice teachers to navigate the complexities of their new roles. Investigating the effectiveness of these professional development opportunities can reveal what works best in helping teachers build confidence and improve their practice.

2.4 *Support systems, programs, and mentorship*

Gholam (2018, p. 3) argues that a mentor is an experienced teacher who supports a novice teacher during their early experiences in the classroom. In other words, a mentor shares knowledge gained over the years and provides guidance and advice to help educators handle issues that may arise. Mentoring plays a critical role in teacher development, which is why programs are designed to address and mitigate problems that new teachers encounter. When a novice teacher participates in such programs, they learn through their experiences and gain insights that help them grow professionally.

Cook (2012, as cited in, Gholam, 2018, p. 4) explains that the overall goal of teacher mentoring is to foster a relationship of ongoing support, collaboration, and the development of knowledge and skills that translate into improved teaching strategies. Part of this study is to know what influence the mentoring programs that the participants received during their preparation have had and how they have contributed to their effectiveness. It aims to identify what additional strategies these programs should implement to help develop better-prepared teachers.

Exploring the role of mentorship and support programs in this research highlights how structures guidance and collaboration can help novice teachers transition into their roles more successfully. By understanding how mentoring impacts teachers' confidence and classroom performance, this study can inform practices that enhance the overall experience and effectiveness of first-year teachers.

3. Methodology

3.1 *Qualitative approach*

The purpose of this study is to investigate the challenges faced by novice teachers during their first year of teaching and to identify strategies that could enhance their effectiveness, as indicated in the literature review. A qualitative approach was chosen because it enables an in-depth exploration of teachers' experiences and perspectives.

Creswell (2012, as cited in, Gholam, 2018, p. 5), explains that qualitative research can lead to information that allows individuals or groups to learn about a phenomenon or an issue. Qualitative research often focuses on how people can have a variety of perspectives on a specific

situation. For this study, this approach is valuable in capturing the diverse insights of novice teachers as they navigate their first year, revealing both the challenges they face and the strategies they use to enhance their effectiveness.

This research aims to gather qualitative data from novice teachers' experiences to identify common themes and support systems that can help improve their transition into the teaching profession.

According to Hartley (2004, p. 323), a case study is particularly suited to research questions that require a detailed understanding of social or organizational processes because of the rich data collected in context. It is therefore a qualitative research method that allows me to explore complex issues in detail to understand their impact on teachers' development. Hartley (2004) highlights several key instruments for data collection in case studies, such as interviews, observations, documents, and surveys. In the interviews, participants provide detailed insights. A semi-structured interview format will help keep the project focused and manageable.

3.2 *Context*

This research was conducted face-to-face with the participation of young adults from different cities in the state of Guanajuato. All of them are studying to become English teachers at a university in Guanajuato where they have received previous preparation to become teachers. They are in their last year of university and have recently started to work as teachers.

As mentioned in previous sections, three teachers who are currently working in Guanajuato City will participate in this research. The EFL teachers work with elementary school children and also teenagers in different public schools. Their age range of the participants is between 21 and 30 years old, none of them have taught any kind of classes before, so this would be their first year working as teachers. All have similar English levels, ranging from B2 to C1.

The participants were informed about the main objective of the research where they were explained general aspects of the dynamics that will be used to collect data. They were given a letter of consent with the description of the study, which contained a statement about their voluntary participation, specifying that they could leave the project at any time without repercussions. Their identity protection was also described, clarifying that their personal data will be kept confidential and that a pseudonym will be used to protect their identity. Furthermore, the experiences they share in the interviews or focus groups will be analyzed and used only for educational purposes.

3.3 *Instruments*

Semi-structured interviews are mostly based on open-ended questions that prompt participants to develop their thoughts and ideas in depth, expressing their perspectives (Karatsareas, 2022, p. 100). Since the research project is aimed at getting to know and understand the experiences of teachers in a teaching context, the initial instrument proposed and the one that seems to be adequate to obtain information are the semi-structured interviews. This instrument allowed me to set the order according to the needs of the interview, as well as add questions to those already established to complement the data. The semi-structured interviews were conducted on an individual basis.

According to Longhurst (2003, p. 145), the focus groups keep the group on the topic but otherwise non-directive, allowing the group to explore the subject from as many angles as they please. Therefore, the focus groups were also included as an additional tool to reinforce and obtain

additional data, as it allows them to cover the desired topics but mainly provides flexibility in their answers.

3.4 *Data collection and analysis*

The information was collected face-to-face interviews, where an interview was scheduled with each of the participants in a private setting. Then, a focus group was held with the three participants where they were given the opportunity to talk freely about their experiences, during the conversation notes were taken on what was most relevant to the study. The findings from the semi-structured interviews and the data collected from the focus groups were verified and also analyzed. The thematic analysis method was employed in this process, it is usually used in qualitative research. It allowed us to analyze previously collected information and also to identify common ideas across the interviews (Riger & Sigurvinsdottir, 2016, p. 33).

Thematic analysis was carried out by carefully reading the interview transcripts to identify initial patterns and codes. These codes were then organized into broader themes that represented the recurring concepts and issues raised by participants, ensuring that each theme reflected the teachers' voices and experiences.

The themes obtained from this approach will be presented in the following section.

4. Results and discussion (data analysis)

The first year of teaching is crucial, as it has a major impact on a teacher's future performance. After analyzing the participants' responses from the data collected, key themes emerged as the challenges experienced in the classroom as well as the support received in the process of becoming a teacher.

4.1 *Theme 1: Anxiety and self-doubt*

A significant theme was the anxiety and self-doubt that novice teachers experienced. Participant 1 described feeling constantly anxious and unprepared, often perceiving judgment from students:

> *"A lot of anxiety, I always felt unprepared, and felt a ton of judgment from the students."*

This anxiety seemed to stem from a lack of experience and a fear of not meeting students' expectations. Participant 2 highlighted difficulties in maintaining students' attention and engagement:

> *"I often struggled to maintain students' attention, especially when they seemed disinterested or disengaged."*

This indicates that novice teachers often feel pressure to keep their classes dynamic and interesting, and any perceived disinterest from students can amplify feelings of inadequacy. Participant 3 also shared that the challenges led to a decline in enthusiasm and an increase in stress:

> *"Yes, I started to dislike giving classes and felt a tremendous amount of pressure. It did not feel like the start I would have wished for."*

Overall, the data reveal that novice teachers' self-doubt is deeply tied to both internal expectations and external classroom realities. The fear of being judged by students, coupled with the uncertainty about instructional effectiveness, often leads to a sense of isolation and frustration.

These feelings can undermine motivation and hinder the development of a positive professional identity.

4.2 *Theme 2: Classroom management and preparation*

Another key theme involved the challenge of classroom management and lesson preparation. Participant 1 highlighted the difficulty of developing engaging materials while feeling underprepared:

> *"Support material development, or having the material to only give classes and not worry about making the material and wonder if it was good or not."*

Participant 2 described being overwhelmed by administrative tasks, which limited time for lesson planning:

> *"I often felt overwhelmed by the administrative tasks and the sheer amount of paperwork required, which left me with less time to focus on improving my teaching practice."*

Participant 3 also reported feeling unsure about whether their materials met the students' needs:

> *"I constantly felt like I was improvising, and I was not sure if what I prepared was really what the students needed."*

These experiences reveal that novice teachers often feel poorly equipped to handle both the content and administrative demands of their roles, which can affect their confidence and sense of effectiveness.

4.3 *Theme 3: Support systems*

While participants mentioned some forms of support, their responses suggested that these support systems were often insufficient or not fully aligned with their needs. Participant 1 described being assigned a mentor but indicated that the guidance provided was limited:

> *"Fortunately, I had a mentor teacher assigned to me during my first year, she guided me through lesson planning, classroom management, and even small administrative tasks."*

Although this mentorship was helpful in some areas, it lacked the depth and consistency needed to make a significant impact on their teaching effectiveness. Participant 2 noted that changing from teaching adult to young students helped them adapt, but this was more a self-change rather than a structured support system:

> *"What helped was transferring from giving classes to adults to young students."*

This highlights that participants often had to find ways to adjust, rather than receiving support from their institutions. Participant 3 emphasized perseverance and learning from mistakes as their main sources of growth, pointing to the absence of structured guidance:

> *"I knew I had to persevere and make mistakes to learn and improve. Analyze and investigate areas of improvement."*

This demonstrates that personal resilience and commitment to continuous learning are key factors that help teachers overcome early setbacks. Support systems provided not only technical guidance but also emotional and social support. The analysis underscores that the first year is a time of intense learning, where all experiences contribute to shaping the early teaching experience.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the challenges faced by novice teachers during their first year in the profession and the impact of mentoring support on their development. The results indicate that new teachers often struggle with classroom management, emotional stress, and the transition into a professional teaching environment. These difficulties can lead to decreased confidence, lower job satisfaction, and reduced teaching effectiveness.

Based on these findings, institutions should emphasize structured mentoring programs and training initiatives to support novice teachers. To facilitate teachers' transition, schools can establish comprehensive peer support systems where experienced educators guide newcomers. Educators should have access to ready-to-use teaching sources to help them feel more prepared. By implementing these strategies, institutions can foster a supportive professional culture to enhance new teachers' confidence and success in their roles.

However, this study has certain limitations. Time was an important factor in the development of the research, so it was conducted with a limited number of participants. The sample size may not fully represent all teaching environments and administrative support. Future research should explore the long-term effects of mentoring and analyze how different types of support impact teacher retention and student learning outcomes.

Supporting novice teachers is crucial for building a strong and effective education system. By providing proper training, schools can help new teachers overcome early challenges and gain confidence in their roles. These solutions not only make teaching more manageable but also improve student learning. If we address these issues now, we can create a more supportive and sustainable environment for future educators.

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